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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 003095

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STATE FOR EAP/MTS, INR/B  
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/24/2016  
TAGS: [MOPS](#) [MCAP](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: ESPERON - THE BATTERING RAM

Classified By: (U) Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Scott Bellard  
for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. Lieutenant General Esperon succeeded General Senga as the 35th Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines on July 21. He has a reputation as a tough combat soldier, and has pledged both to crush Communist rebels and put down any attempt to unseat the Arroyo government. Esperon strongly backs Philippine Defense Reform, and is especially interested in improving the lot of common soldiers. He has worked closely with US counterparts in the past, and is likely to continue to do so as Chief of Staff. END SUMMARY.

#### A SOLDIER'S SOLDIER

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12. (SBU) Lieutenant General Hermogenes "Jun" Esperon, Jr., the new Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), stands in stark contrast to his predecessor, the amiable Generoso Senga. Barrel-chested, dour, and taciturn, he is a soldier's soldier, who is more respected -- and perhaps feared -- than loved by his colleagues and subordinates. A 1974 graduate of the Philippine Military Academy, Esperon has spent almost entire career in combat. As a second lieutenant, he battled Muslim insurgents during intense and ferocious fighting in Jolo, and later was hand picked in 2001 because of his experience to command the 103rd Infantry Brigade on Basilan in the pursuit of Abu Sayyaf Group terrorists, who had kidnapped American missionaries. Earlier in 2000, he had commanded the 602nd Infantry Brigade in Cotabato, leading then-President Estrada's "all out war" offensive against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) that culminated with the capture of the MILF's principal base camp of Abu Bakr. He was Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations (J3) in 2002-2003, and subsequently served as commander of the 7th Infantry Division and Commander of the Special Operations Command in 2004. He became head of the Philippine Army in 2005, where he spearheaded the "Battalions of Excellence" program and convinced Secretary of Defense Cruz to include it as an integral part of Philippine Defense Reform.

#### LONG-STANDING TIES TO ARROYO

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13. (C) Having served as Deputy Commander of the Presidential Security Group under then-President Fidel V. Ramos, Esperon was chosen by President Arroyo as PSG Commander in 2002-2003. Only one other PSG commander, General Fabian Ver, has had the distinction of going on to become AFP Chief of Staff.

Considered by many as an Arroyo loyalist, Esperon's name figured in the notorious "Garci tapes" vote-rigging scandal related to the May 2004 Presidential elections. Although subsequently cleared of any wrongdoing by military investigators, Esperon continues to face criticism -- which he shrugs off -- from leftist and opposition politicians. However, few expect such criticism to have a significant impact on his ability to serve as Chief of Staff.

#### READY TO SUPPRESS ANY THREAT TO THE GOVERNMENT

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14. (C) Observers widely credit Esperon for playing a key role in snuffing out the February 24 coup attempt involving small elements of the Marines and the Scout Ranger regiment. Esperon quickly rallied Philippine Army troops and reportedly instructed his units to fire on mutinous Marines and Rangers should they leave their barracks. In public comments, Esperon, (playing upon his name, which means "ram" in Spanish), stated coup plotters would not have any chance with him. "I will batter them," he said. As Philippine Army commander, Esperon reportedly recommended the court martial of Brigadier General "Danny" Lim, who was relieved as head of the Scout Rangers after the February coup effort unraveled. He has warned that as Chief of Staff he will be "strict" with any soldier who does not follow the chain of command, rule of law, and the Philippine Constitution.

#### FOCUS ON THE TROOPS

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15. (SBU) Esperon has consistently focused on taking care of his troops, and made improving soldiers' welfare one of his principal objectives when head of the Philippine Army, stating that his emphasis was on the rifle squads, which he considered "the backbone" of the Army. He has said that, during his tenure as Chief of Staff, he intends to focus on the concerns of officers and troops, and strongly and clearly endorsed the Philippine Defense Reform program during his change of command ceremony.

#### VOW TO CRUSH COMMUNIST INSURGENTS

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16. (SBU) Vowing to crush Communist Party of the Philippines/New People's Army (CPP/NPA) rebels within two years, Esperon has recommended (and President Arroyo has approved) again to split Mindanao's 72,000 member Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) in two in order better to cope with the Communist threat, as it was in the 1970s. Although the shape of the new commands, which will take effect the first week of August, is still unclear, the NPA is present largely on the eastern half of the island, while the Abu Sayyaf, Jemaah Islamiyah, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front predominate on the western half. Esperon has pledged as well to send additional forces to the Visayas within the next three months to combat Communist rebels.

17. (SBU) Esperon is already pushing to redeploy many desk-bound soldiers to the field to fight the insurgents. Speaking to the press, he said, "We simply have to reexamine our maneuver forces. Many are still in their headquarters; we need to put them where they are needed. We have to focus on the front lines."

#### PAST GOOD RELATIONS WITH U.S. COUNTERPARTS

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18. (C) With a retirement date of February 2008, Esperon will be, after Narciso Abaya, President Arroyo's longest serving Chief of Staff, and can be expected to put his mark on the Armed Forces. As a strong, no-nonsense leader, he is unlikely to brook any dissent, and can be expected to deal ruthlessly with any challenge to the Philippine government. Esperon has worked closely with US counterparts throughout his career. Although he is clearly no push-over, we expect this close relationship to continue during his service as Chief of Staff.

## BIO NOTES

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19. (SBU) Esperon is a highly decorated officer, having received the Presidential Merit Award medal from President Ramos in 1998, as well as two Philippine Legion of Honor medals, nine Distinguished Service Stars, four Gold Crosses, and six Bronze Crosses. He is married to Dr. Lorna Valenzuela Esperon, with whom he has seven children. Despite his fierce reputation, Esperon is said to be a devoted family man, and his face lights up when discussion turns to his family and his children. While projecting a hard exterior, Esperon can be emotional. He broke down in tears during the July 22 Philippine Army change of command when Defense Secretary Cruz evoked the 1975 fighting in Jolo in which

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Esperon lost his best friend, the brother of incoming Philippine Army commander Lieutenant General Romeo Tolentino. Esperon speaks fluent English.

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